

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *Talking in Bed*

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,  
Lying together there goes back so far,  
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.  
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest  
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.  
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.

Philip Larkin<sup>1</sup>

## ✧ Reflections

It might not be an obviously formal poem, but “Talking in Bed” has always been one of my favorite examples of technical mastery and arrangement. I have long proposed that pleasure from reading poetry does not depend on knowledge about poetic structures, but in this case an attention to Larkin’s formal choices enriches the subject and rewards the astute reader. I hope you can forgive this more didactic edition of *Wellspring*!

My first and best mentor, Claudia Emerson, introduced me to a book when I was an undergraduate: Mary Kinzie’s *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry*. We spent the better part of a semester learning the ways in which the craft of writing can both guide and be guided by the art of reading. It was a class that detailed formal concepts and methods of analysis and what might have sounded to us undergrad wannabe poets like tedious work became one of the more inspiring courses I ever took.

One of the valuable things Emerson and Kinzie taught me was about rhyme, particularly slant rhyme (as Larkin uses), and what is best described as meaning-relation. Larkin’s poem is a prime illustration. Look, for example, at the slant, or off-, rhyme of end words: easiest / honest / unrest. In a poem that suggests what *ought* to be is not necessarily what *is*, the relationship of words that couch “honest” between “easiest” and “unrest” makes for a provocative equation. Horizon /

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<sup>1</sup> “Talking in Bed” by Philip Larkin from *Collected Poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. Used by permission.

isolation is another example; a poem that wrestles with notions of loneliness even in company is enriched by the meaning-relation of a distancing landscape as a backdrop for tender, even if strained, intimacy.

The final stanza is complicated, a little dark, but ultimately gesturing toward hope. Of course kindness and not-unkindness, though logically and grammatically synonymous, are, in spirit, very different. After all, to say that someone is not ugly and not stupid, is certainly not the same as saying someone is beautiful and brilliant. Nor is saying something not-hateful the same as saying something loving. You see what Larkin is up to here: he's offering a way to think about the messiness in human relationships, especially our ways of communicating; very little is ever simple. He makes a point of using the word "difficult" rather than "impossible" and I'm left feeling as though the poem challenges us to take up the charge. Difficult, but not impossible. I'm reminded of the Indian yogi Sai Baba's dictum (other sources attribute the phrase to Socrates): "Before you speak, ask yourself: is it kind, is it necessary, is it true, does it improve on the silence?" High stakes, yes, but not unattainable ones.

It might also be noted that the poem is structured using tercets — three-line stanzas with a regular rhyme scheme. This choice interests me because it draws my attention away from the couple talking (or not talking) in bed. Couplets might make more sense. But, Larkin's use of a third line evokes an Other, a presence, perhaps the silence itself assumes the form. A trinity of lines is also evocative of the capital P Presence, invisible but there. The riches of this poem keep unfolding, you see, and as is often the case, the closer we look, the more mysterious and the more complicated the subject becomes.

Finally, I refer back to the title, another hope-filled choice: *talk<sup>ing</sup>* (as in, presently happening, a gerund denoting *action*). It's as though Larkin refuses to give in to the weight of difficulty and instead has the poem, in its conciseness and compression, lead us to a heightened awareness of our responsibilities—and our privileges—in caring for one another. What more could we ask of a single poem, that we be reminded of both.

### ✚ About the Poet

Philip Larkin (1922 - 1985) was an English poet, novelist and librarian. His many honors include the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He was offered, but declined, the position of Poet Laureate in 1984. Despite some controversy about his personal life and opinions, Larkin remains one of Britain's most popular poets. In 2008, over two decades after his death, The Times of London lauded Larkin as the greatest British post-war writer.



**Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey**  
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